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SUBJECT: NIGERIAN MEDIA REACTION TO BUSH UNGA SPEECH,
USG POLICY TOWARD IRAQ

REFTEL: A) State 184783 B) State 177841

C) State 169974

¶11. Summary. Nigerian press coverage surrounding President Bush's September 12 speech to the UN General Assembly and ongoing debate over U.S. policy towards Iraq has been largely overshadowed by domestic political news and the ongoing impeachment battle between President Obasanjo and the legislature. Northern media outlets whose audiences are predominantly Muslim have been more sharply critical of potential U.S. action against Iraq than those based in the South, with strong skepticism expressed at USG arguments on the need to remove the Iraqi President. However, even Southern media generally voiced criticism. End Summary.

Nigerian Media Reaction to Bush UNGA Speech, Iraq

¶12. Nigerian press coverage of President Bush's September 12 address to the UN General Assembly was spotty and largely confined to the international news sections rather than the front page. Radio and television coverage of the international debate over Iraq has been light. Nigeria news outlets are far more focused on domestic issues such as the ongoing political battle between President Obasanjo and the legislative branch over possible impeachment, upcoming elections and the aftermath of voter registration, and economic stories of interest to the average Nigerian.

¶13. Reporting on the Bush speech, subsequent remarks, and USG policy towards Iraq in the southern newspapers has been straightforward, relying on wire service material and direct quotes from world leaders but no editorial or analytical pieces. Coverage has focused on European and international resistance to any USG unilateral action against Iraq. Coverage in the Northern papers, while still confined to the international news sections, has given greater play to USG policy towards Iraq and has been more critical. Northern papers such as the "New Nigerian," the "Weekly Trust," and "The Triumph" have also provided strongly worded editorials denouncing USG policy towards Iraq. Post notes that some of the material published in these news organs is coming from web sites (e.g., IslamOnline.net) geared towards Muslim audiences.

¶14. Criticisms and observations of USG policy have centered on the following themes:

-- USG policy on Iraq represents anti-Islamic bias of USG since 1970s when U.S. hostages taken in Iran; in post-Cold War period, U.S. sees Islam as greatest threat to U.S. domination of world political and economic life and USG Middle East policy geared towards containment/weakening of Muslim states. ". . . with the collapse of socialism in the former Soviet Union, the U.S. finds Islam and Muslim nations as her greatest enemy, looking for a slight opportunity to unleash terror on them . . ." "The Triumph," September 15-16, 2002; an article entitled, "Before America's Second Crusade."

-- U.S. "set up" (i.e., encouraged) Saddam Hussein to invade Kuwait so that they could destroy Iraqi ability to develop a strong, independent Iraq that would not bend to USG policies in the Middle East. " It was decided, therefore, that the USA, backed up by Israel, should attack and destroy the military capabilities of Iraq, thereby forcing the capitulation of Islamic radicalism; . . . the female American Ambassador to Baghdad at the time misled Saddam Hussein into

believing that American would not raise a finger, should the Iraqi Army invade the disputed territories in Kuwait," "New Nigerian," September 13, 2002; an article entitled, "Bush's Obsession."

-- WMD argument lacks substance, adequate proof and relies more on suspected intentions of Iraq rather than hard evidence; is also a double standard in that USG is not applying same policy of regime change to other states holding WMD (e.g., North Korea, Israel, etc.); USG is also a possessor of WMD. ". . . America is looking the other way over Israel's nuclear weapons." "The Comet," September 23, 2002; an article entitled "Iraq and the Future of the UN."

-- U.S. military used depleted uranium in bombs dropped during Gulf War; depleted uranium did far more damage to Iraqi people and U.S. soldiers than Iraqi use of bio/chem. weapons. ". . . these shells, besides being extremely destructive, were found in many cases to cause cancer and other severe illnesses, not among Iraqi troops but also among U.S. soldiers who were around the areas where they were dumped or used . . . Iraqi rates of cancer in the aftermath of the Gulf War have gone up over 50 percent in some regions. This, combined with US-led efforts to keep medicine out of Iraq has exacerbated the situation and overwhelmed doctors in Baghdad, Mosul and Basra," "Weekly Trust," September 13-19, 2002; an article entitled, "US vs. Iraq: Whose war is it anyway?"

-- Argument that Iraq has ignored UN resolutions also represents a double standard in that Israel has ignored UN resolutions but the USG has not made similar demands of Tel Aviv. ". . . why should the US continue to turn its searchlight on Muslim nations as those harboring terrorists while the biggest terror of the world, Israel, who defies every bit of UN resolution in the Middle East peace process carries on with its ruthless, bloodsucking campaign against the hapless (sic) Palestinians?" "The Triumph," September 13, 2002; an article entitled, "September 11, US and Muslims."

-- President Bush is carrying on family vendetta against Saddam Hussein and the USG policy towards Iraq has not evolved since 1991. ". . . the Bush family would never be contented unless the Iraqi President is disgraced out of office through defeat in a war with America." "Sunday Vanguard," September 15, 2002; an article entitled, "The Wars of the Bushmen."

-- Iraq's neighbors (other than Israel) have not voiced concern over any danger posed by Iraq; USG showing its pro-Israel bias vis-`-vis rest of Middle East. "Many Arab nations have flocked to Baghdad to show solidarity with Saddam Hussein." "Weekend Triumph," September 28, 2002; an article entitled, "Opening the Gates of Hell."

15. USG public diplomacy strategy on Iraq could usefully address the foregoing criticisms by focusing on themes such as USG support and assistance levels for Middle Eastern countries, USG past practice/willingness to work multilaterally on Mideast problems, Iraq's use of WMD on its own people, neighbors, how use of WMD has affected the environment/health of Iraqi people/what their use by Iraq today could mean, rationale for following differing policy on Iraq as opposed to other WMD holders, balance between Israeli and Palestinian interests, differences in the USG approach to Iraq between 1991 and today, and more specific information linking the Iraq leadership with terrorist organizations.